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ABSTRACT

A solution to the problem of preparing teacher education students to develop curricula that focus on multiculturalism is to help them develop the ability to infuse multicultural children's literature and young adult literature into the elementary and secondary school curriculum. Teacher educators must do more than expose their pre-service and in-service teachers to multicultural literature: they must structure their classes so that students see their own and other cultures present in the classroom. A course entitled "Models of Teaching: A Cross-Discipline Integrative Seminar" at Marywood University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences is designed to explore diversity and link it to the creation and implementation of curriculum in the higher education classroom. It uses free-writes and case studies to help the students address potentially emotionally charged topics such as diversity. (NKA)

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Fostering the Exchange of Ideas about Diversity in the Higher Education Classroom

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Fostering the Exchange of Ideas about Diversity
In the Higher Education Classroom

Introduction

> When those who have the power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or to hear you, whether you are dark-skinned, old, disabled, female or speak with a different accent of dialect than theirs, when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked in a mirror and saw nothing.
>
> Rich, *The Feminist Classroom*, p.1.

When I first read these words as I prepared for a class, *Models of Teaching: A Cross-Discipline Integrative Seminar,* which I designed as a part of our Doctoral Program in Human Development, I was inspired to begin to examine the issue of diversity at a very basic level. I began to reflect on the questions that philosophers discuss: 1.)What is real? 2.)What is good? 3.) What is beautiful? I focused particularly on the concept of reality.

In classrooms we, as higher education teachers, create a certain culture which may form our students' concept of reality. Suppose that in some way the reality of the life experiences of our students is different to varying degrees from what is presented in our classrooms? What effect will this have on them? Are we presenting a reality of which they are not a part? Will experiences in our classrooms be for them like looking in a mirror and seeing nothing? Will they in turn do the same in their classrooms? This paper is an exploration of the rationale and methods as well as some brief comments on the knowledge base that we use to prepare our pre-service and in-service teachers to develop programs that have as their purpose

> ...the development of citizens for a more democratic society through provision of more accurate and comprehensive disciplinary knowledge and through enhancement of students' academic achievement and critical thinking applied to social problems. It seeks to promote the valuing of diversity and equal opportunity

> for all people through understanding of the contribution and perspectives of people of differing race, ethnicity, culture, language, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and physical abilities and disabilities.
>
> Morey & Kitano, 1997, p. 12

It is focused on educating our pre-service and in-service teachers to face the reality that "diversity then must be viewed as *reality*, the true fabric of U.S.... schools." (Ruddell, 1997.)

Rationale

In higher education literacy classrooms our solution to the problem of preparing our students to develop curriculum that focuses on multiculturalism is to help them develop the ability to infuse multicultural children's and young adult literature into the elementary and secondary school curriculum. It is a reasonable and valuable course of action. In fact, a young African-American 11th grade student recently told me how much she appreciated reading about African-American people in school. Perhaps it was a way for her to see herself as a part of the reality of that classroom. Surely, we believe, if we show our pre-service and in-service teachers how to use literature that "reflects the customs, beliefs, and experiences of people of differing races and nationalities," (Literacy Dictionary, 1995) then our students will be prepared to help the youngsters they teach develop an awareness and appreciation of other cultures that will prepare them to interact effectively with people from other cultures. But we must ask ourselves whether or not this focus on multicultural literature is enough to accomplish these lofty goals even in regard to "differing nationalities and races." And this definition in the Literacy Dictionary does not include the other languages, religions, genders, sexual orientations, and physical abilities and disabilities referred to by Morey and Kitano in their definition of multicultural education. Their definition of multiculturalism is substantiated by data from the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (1991) that indicate sharp upturns in enrollment in higher education by women, international students, older students, gay and lesbian students and students with disabilities. And in the last ten years this trend has continued.

I believe that we must do more than expose our pre-service and in-service teachers to multicultural literature. In fact, I believe that we must structure

our classes so that our students see their own and other cultures present in our classrooms. Providing opportunities to explore their attitudes toward their own and other cultures, to learn about various cultures in depth, and to engage throughout in critical thinking are viable avenues to that end. It is then that they will be prepared to plan and implement curriculum that is focused on developing an awareness and an appreciation of their own and other cultures as well as the ability to interact effectively with one another. The very same young African-American student told me that when slavery was discussed in her classroom, her white teacher referred to "us," as the white people and "them," as the slaves. The recognition that there were African-American students in that class seems to have gone unconsidered. I cannot help but think that if that high school teacher had had an opportunity in his higher education experience to explore issues related to various cultures that he would have been more sensitive to this issue.

These insights as well as the methods and comments on establishing a knowledge base about other cultures that I share with you are based on my experiences in a course, *Models of Teaching: A Cross-Discipline Integrative Seminar*. I believe that I will be able to do some research in this area and then make a research-based contribution to the area of methods and content of courses in higher education that will help pre-service and in-service teachers present a reality in their classrooms that is inclusive.

Methods

In *Models of Teaching*, we have identified a goal of preparing our students to become effective higher education teachers by "...attempting to carefully integrate learning theory and the actual practice of instruction" (Marywood University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences Catalogue, 1997-99, p.128). As a part of that curriculum I decided that we should explore diversity and link it to the creation and implementation of curriculum in the higher education classroom. I decided to use two techniques, the free-write and the case study. I will give an overview of one three-hour class.

I asked my student to do a "free-write" in response to the Adrienne Rich quote that I shared with you at the beginning of my paper. This beginning activity was aimed at allowing each person the opportunity to explore his/her background. I asked them to write for five minutes in reaction to the quote and then we shared our views. In comparison to asking students to respond verbally, the writing activity affords each person the opportunity to reflect

and respond to an issue. In addition, as students become aware of their attitudes, growth is possible; as they are exposed to the ideas of others, they have the opportunity to clarify their attitudes.

Next, I shared demographic data to support my claim that our higher education population is changing. In addition, I made comments from my own experiences that, while anecdotal, served to give "some life" and add an element of rueful humor to the data. For example, in reference to the increase in international students, I related the example of a former colleague, who decried the increase in international students at Harvard by saying, "Harvard is not what it used to be!" This comment was punctuated by a deep, melodramatic sigh. When another colleague asked what she meant my that statement, I said, "I think she means that they let people like us in now." I also asked my students to share their experiences and observations.

Another technique that I used was discussion with the use of case studies. Both the choice of the case study as a vehicle for discussion and the choice of the particular case study is pivotal to the success in an emotionally charged discussion. Case studies are particularly suited to this type of discussion because there is a greater comfort level for the students when they are commenting on the behavior of others rather than on their own attitudes and behavior. This is pivotal to the success of the type of discussion, which students may fear. My one African-American student in this class of eight women told me that she was "fearful of what would happen in the class" when we began this discussion. When I later asked her why, she said, "Because, I was afraid that you would expect me to represent my race, but you didn't." This comment was helpful to me for my growth because, while I was concerned about exploring the uncharted territory of the "diversity" discussion, I never thought of the concern that she had raised. Before the lesson, I felt just a general sense of trepidation. I did notice that I also made a mistake in this class. The mistake, too, was also a growth experience for me, although I continue to cringe when I think of it. As I tried to express the idea that in our university and our surrounding communities we do not have many opportunities to interact with non-white people, I said. "Lydia (my African-American student) is our diversity." How could I have pointed out her "differentness." We, the White teacher and students, are as different from her as she is from us!

The choice of the case study is also important to the success of this venture of the exploration of attitudes and the expansion of knowledge. I chose a particular case study, "The White Teacher" (Seaberry & Gillespie, 1997), because it was not always clear just what the real attitudes of the characters were. This factor assured that we would have issues to address. I asked the students to read the case study in preparation for class and to prepare for a discussion. I did try to identify some issues that I thought might arise and was somewhat successful but my students thought of many aspects that I did not. I tried throughout the discussion to do no more than facilitate the discussion with open-ended questions. I did not share my own views. I have found that this often imposes a limitation on the discussion. As we immersed ourselves in our discussion, I really had few responsibilities because the students responded to each other rather than looking to me. This student-to-student response is an indication to me that the discussion was a successful one. I believe that students became aware of attitudes that they did not know they had and learned about the views of others.

While I am more confident now about the use of free writes and case studies in discussing an emotionally charged topic, I know that with a new set of students I may have a different, perhaps not as positive or just different in some other way, experience. The point is that my students and I will have NO EXPERIENCE in this area, if I do not include this topic and approach in my future classes. So I will continue with this not risk free teaching /learning technique. In fact, I plan to use role-plays, which may be even riskier in bringing attitudes and issues that may distress some of us to the surface. I will continue to structure my classes so that the students and I can explore our own attitudes and learn about one another's attitudes as a way of helping to create a reality of which we are all a part. Perhaps as my students begin or continue to teach in higher education, they will be inspired to do the same.

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